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The thought of raw sewage flowing into the Great Lakes makes most people cringe. Yet it happens - mostly when heavy rains and melting snow cause municipal sewer systems to overflow. The law allows that water, which often includes untreated sewage, to be released in certain amounts. Then it often makes its way into the Great Lakes.

To combat the problem, two congressmen from Illinois this month announced legislation that, starting in 2027, would quadruple fines for cities that release sewage waters into the lakes.

According to Republican Mark Kirk, who is co-sponsoring the legislation with Democrat Dan Lipinski, about 24 billion gallons of sewer overflow water are released each year into the Great Lakes. Kirk claims that about half of that amount, or 13 billion gallons, comes from Detroit and goes into Lake Erie via the Detroit River.

Motor City officials say calling the overflow "sewage dumping" is misleading and that they have spent \$1 billion-plus in the past 15 years to upgrade their sewer collection system. In addition, ground is scheduled to be broken next year on a 7-mile underground tunnel to capture excess flow during wet weather.

But Kirk and Lipinski want Detroit to be more like Chicago, which last released sewage into Lake Michigan in August 2002. The Windy City completed 109 miles of area tunnels last year in order to better handle the overflow.

Under the proposed federal legislation, cities' penalties for violating Environmental Protection Agency regulations would increase from a maximum of \$25,000 a day to up to \$100,000 per violation per day. The legislation also would start a fund to help pay for wastewater treatment and wetland restoration so that cities could take the necessary action to upgrade their systems.

With the 20-year window provided by the proposed legislation, we think it is a reasonable target

to help slow the flow of sewage into the Great Lakes.